Don’t Wait for a Child to Scream Before Teaching Communication

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Using ordinary moments to build language through naturalistic teaching and successive approximations

Sometimes we become so focused on managing challenging behavior that we overlook the best opportunities to teach the skills that would make that behavior less necessary.

A child begins screaming, and suddenly everyone is paying attention. Adults retrieve her communication book, offer choices, model words, and encourage her to express what she needs.

But what were we doing five minutes earlier, when she was calm, happy, and participating?

Were we helping her communicate then?

This is one of the most important questions we can ask about our language instruction.

If the only time we actively teach communication is when a child is distressed, we are missing most of the day.

Language Develops Through Repeated Opportunities

Children develop language through countless interactions with the people around them. They hear words, observe how other people use them, try communicating, and experience the results.

For children with significant language deficits, we often need to create these opportunities more intentionally.

That does not mean turning every interaction into a formal lesson. In fact, many of the best opportunities occur during ordinary activities.

A child wants to go outside. Another child is waiting for a turn. Someone needs help opening a container. A favorite toy falls on the floor. A child finishes eating and wants more.

Each situation creates an opportunity for meaningful communication.

Our job is to notice those opportunities and help the child use the communication skills she is developing.

Start With What the Child Already Wants to Communicate

Suppose a child approaches an adult holding an empty cup.

The adult recognizes immediately that she wants juice. In the past, the adult might simply fill the cup and hand it back.

That is a kind response, but it may also be a missed teaching opportunity.

Instead, the adult can model an appropriate way to request the drink.

“You want juice. Here’s juice.”

The adult might point to the juice picture in the child’s communication book, model the sign, or say the word slowly enough for the child to observe the mouth movements.

If the child independently uses an emerging communication response, we can reinforce it naturally by responding to the request.

We are not trying to make the child work unnecessarily for something she needs. We are using a meaningful moment to connect communication with its purpose.

Reinforce Emerging Speech Without Demanding Perfection

One of the principles of applied behavior analysis is shaping, or reinforcing successive approximations toward a desired behavior.

When children are beginning to develop speech, their first attempts may sound very different from the words adults produce.

A child learning to say “juice” might initially produce only a vowel sound or part of the word. With appropriate instruction and practice, that production may gradually become clearer.

We should not dismiss early attempts because they are imperfect.

If the child makes a meaningful effort to produce a sound, we can acknowledge it warmly and model the clearer word.

“You said juice! Juice. Here you go.”

Over time, we may gradually shape more accurate speech when it is appropriate for the child’s abilities and treatment goals.

But there is an important distinction between encouraging speech and making speech mandatory. A child who successfully requests juice with a picture, sign, or communication device has communicated. We should honor that communication rather than withhold the drink until she vocalizes.

Speech development and functional communication can be taught together without making one dependent on the other.

Expand Language One Step at a Time

As a child’s communication develops, we can gradually increase the complexity of what we model.

A child who requests “scooter” may eventually learn “want scooter,” followed by “I want scooter.”

A child who communicates “sad” may eventually learn “I’m sad,” “I miss Mom,” or “I feel sad because Mom left.”

We should not expect the child to make these changes all at once.

Instead, we model language that is just beyond what she currently uses, provide opportunities to practice, and reinforce meaningful communication.

The goal is steady growth, not perfect performance.

Teach During the Quiet Moments

Consider lunchtime.

Children are eating, the room is relatively calm, and the adults may finally have an opportunity to sit down. It can be tempting to let the children watch a video while everyone enjoys a few quiet minutes.

There is nothing inherently wrong with having peaceful moments. Children and adults both need them.

But lunchtime is also full of natural opportunities for language.

We can comment on what children are eating, offer choices, model requests for more, talk about what happened earlier in the day, and encourage children to communicate with one another.

A child might request “more,” indicate “finished,” comment “good,” or ask for help opening a package.

These interactions do not have to interrupt lunch. They can become a natural part of it.

The same is true during play, transitions, outdoor activities, and ordinary classroom routines.

Don’t Make Every Interaction a Demand

There is a danger in becoming so enthusiastic about language instruction that we turn every enjoyable experience into a test.

A child reaches for a toy, and we insist that she say its name. She wants another bite of food, and we require her to repeat a word. She approaches us for comfort, and we begin prompting communication responses before acknowledging her feelings.

That is not what we want.

We should create opportunities for communication, model language frequently, and reinforce emerging skills. But children also deserve interactions in which they are simply understood and cared for.

Sometimes we prompt a response. Sometimes we model the word ourselves. Sometimes we expand what the child says. And sometimes we simply respond.

Good naturalistic instruction requires judgment.

Teach Language for More Than Getting Things

We should also remember that communication is not limited to requesting preferred items.

When a child laughs during a game, we can model “funny.” When she sees something interesting, we can model “look.” When she becomes frustrated, we can model “hard,” “help,” or “frustrated.”

We can talk about feelings in stories, describe what other children are doing, and model comments during shared experiences.

These interactions help children discover that language is useful for sharing attention, expressing thoughts, and connecting with people.

That is a much broader purpose than simply obtaining reinforcement.

The Adults Need Practice, Too

Naturalistic language teaching can look effortless when an experienced therapist does it. The therapist notices an opportunity, models a word, provides an appropriate prompt, and responds naturally.

But these skills take practice.

Newer therapists may be concentrating so hard on managing the schedule, collecting data, and following treatment plans that they overlook opportunities for communication.

That does not necessarily mean they are unwilling to teach language. It may mean they need more modeling, coaching, and feedback.

I would rather help a therapist understand why an interaction matters than simply hand over a script and expect perfect implementation.

When adults understand the purpose of the instruction, they become better able to recognize opportunities independently.

Communication Should Be Happening All Day

The greatest opportunity to improve a child's communication may not be another formal language program.

It may be the hundreds of ordinary moments when someone could model a word, respond to a gesture, expand an utterance, or help the child express something meaningful.

Those opportunities accumulate.

A child who communicates successfully throughout the day receives repeated evidence that language is useful, that people listen, and that her efforts matter.

Don't wait until a child is screaming to teach her how to communicate. Teach her when she is happy, curious, playful, relaxed, and engaged. Those are the moments that prepare her to communicate when life becomes difficult.

References

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About the author

Teacher at heart, behavior analyst, and writer, Dr. Peter Beddow has spent more than two decades helping children, families, and school teams navigate autism, behavior, trauma, and learning differences with clarity, structure, and hope. He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Middlebury College and earned a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, where his work focused on fairness, learning, and access in assessment. Peter has worked as a teacher, special educator, clinical director, consultant, and board certified behavior analyst in homes, schools, and clinics. He founded Accessible Hope, a Nashville-area practice supporting diverse families, and writes and teaches practical, humane approaches to behavior and learning.

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